



Global Digital Compact and WSIS+20 Finnish Internet Forum - April 3 2024

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So, I hope you have enjoyed the lunch. The afternoon session we will have in English, and we will be focusing on the Global Digital Compacts and WSIS+20. Speakers in this session, we have David Souter, who is the managing director for ICT Development Associates, and my colleague Aki Enkenberg from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. We will be focusing especially on the zero draft of the Global Digital Compact, which has been published just just recently. Also, we will look more closely in the process of WSIS+20, and the forthcoming negotiations. Also, we will share some of our insights regarding the upcoming negotiations on the GDC.

But, without further ado, I would like to give the floor to David Souter. David, if you could please shortly introduce your self to the audience, also. Many thanks.

David Souter

So, hello, and thank you very much for inviting me to talk today. The subject that I'll focus on is the forthcoming review of the World Summit on the Information Society, what it's considering, and how it relates to the Global Digital Compact, of which the zero draft was published yesterday. I'll start with some background about WSIS, then talk about some of the themes, and, finally, describe what's in that zero draft.

But, a word about my credentials, if you like, to start with. I'm an independent expert on digital society and its impact, and I work mostly for United Nations agencies. I spent much of the last quarter century working on WSIS and its implications. I wasn't at the plenipotentiary meeting of the ITU that proposed WSIS in 1998, but I was at most of the planning meetings, and at both sessions at the summit, Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005. I've been at many of the annual WSIS forums since then, all but one meeting of the IGF, which is one of the outcomes of the summit.

As you know, I've worked as an advisor on WSIS outcomes for UNCTAD, UNESCO, ITU, the UN in New York, and the General Assembly, and I led the 10 year review of WSIS for the UN's Commission on Science and Technology for Development, alongside your colleague Mervi Kultamaa. I'm beginning to work in the same role now for the 20 year review for that commission, so, I've spent an awful lot of my life on WSIS and its impact, a lot more than I imagined 20 years ago.

I'll start by describing it, because I think the history of it is not always clear to people. It was born from a proposal by the ITU, 25 years ago, to have a World Summit about the potential of information technology, and what that meant for economic and social development. Most world summits are about problems, this was something positive, which was a different way of holding a summit. It was held in two phases, not intentionally, but because the UN could not choose between two hosts that were willing, but actually that proved quite helpful.

The first phase, in Geneva in 2003, resulted in a set of principles, lots of aspirations, and a framework of what were called 'action lines', to address digital and economic development issues, but it left two issues unresolved because of disputes amongst the stakeholders, and those were about how its outcomes should be funded, and about, what we might say, who runs the Internet.

The second phase, in Tunis in 2005, was concerned with those two disputes. The one about finance was settled quite quickly, it was mostly an argument therefore, about the Internet, and especially the role of ICANN.

In UN summits and negotiating fora, people argue line by line, word by word, about what should be agreed in the final text, and those negotiations can be pretty acrimonious, but the final texts are always compromises, absolutely so in this case. But, once that compromise has been agreed, the text that comes out of it has a really powerful and lasting resonance.

So, what was in the outcomes from WSIS? The Geneva summit gave a core principle, which is that we should engage to create a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society, which should be built around sustainable development and human rights. That phrase of people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society -- personally, I prefer Digital Society now -- that's remained the primary statement of the WSIS framework, and it's the primary interest in it for most developing countries.

Geneva also set some targets for connectivity for completion by 2015. It listed goals in 18 different action lines, which were concerned with issues which might be digital, cybersecurity, and access to information, or they might be development areas like health or education. Now, remember when these were agreed, some countries had no more than two or three phone lines per 100 people at the time. Mobile phones are barely mentioned in the outcome document, because they weren't seen at that time as critical. Facebook has just been launched, nothing like today's social media environment, no cloud computing, no big data, the bare beginnings of the Internet of things, so a very different digital environment from that we have today.

Obviously, the outcomes of most interest to you are going to be those concerned with the Internet. These came from the Tunis phase, and they included the IGF, which has been successful and evolved significantly, but they also included a proposal for what was called 'enhanced cooperation', and that was meant to be a way of enabling governments outside the North to play a bigger part in global Internet governance, in particular of ICANN, and some countries feel that nothing has come of that, so it may well re-emerge in the review.

One other outcome of the WSIS process is the prominence of multistakeholder participation in digital discussions. That was very contentious and new at the summit, and fought for fiercely by civil society. It's a major break with the UN's normal multilateral frameworks of doing things, but has become accepted as the norm for digital policy development. Everybody in this context now says that they support it.

I think two things I'd say to remember from all of that -- particularly for this audience -- WSIS is not primarily about the Internet, it's about economic and social development. While I understand why the Internet community is most concerned about its impact for the Internet, it's important to recognize that's not true for many stakeholders, especially in developing countries. Second, WSIS has been a process, so it's involved a lot of institutions in the UN and beyond. It's sustained by the annual meetings to WSIS Forum and the IGF. It's set much of the tone of discussions in the last 20 years, but its founding documents date from a very different time, and I think the GDC, which we'll come on to, is likely to play much more to that role in the future.

WSIS was reviewed in 2015, when the IGF's mandate was also renewed up to 2025. The 20 year review will take place in the General Assembly next year, and be a negotiated text document. But, it's now connected to two other things, to the Sustainable Development Goals, which were agreed in 2015, and to the Global Digital Compact, which is not yet agreed.

I think WSIS represents an inflection point in international thinking about the digital society. It was a point at which people changed the way in which they thought about what digitalization might mean. I think many people feel the same is happening today, this is a new inflection point, and there are three factors here that I want to suggest.

First, hardly original, digitalization is now the norm in most of our societies. It's the norm in the way that we are governed, in the way that business works, how people interact with one another, how we live and work, read the news, make relationships. This is very uneven and unequal still, but the scope and scale of digitalization are far greater than they were, and the direction of travel is obvious now. When WSIS met in Geneva, 20 years ago, Information Society was an aspiration, today it's an observable reality. Back then, we could talk about ICT's, Information Technology's, potential if they became prevalent, and now we talk about what's possible because they are pervasive.

The second underlying factor is the advances being made in technological development now, particularly artificial intelligence, which look and feel, to many people, like a moment of transition between a world that we, at my age, have known, and the world my children will inherit, and my grandchildren. There's a great deal of uncertainty around what that means, and anxiety about the pace of change here. Though WSIS was overwhelmingly optimistic about the future, since then, WSIS would become much more aware of risks as well as opportunities. Issues, for instance, of surveillance and criminality, or of the role of online media in spreading not just knowledge, but also propaganda, for the impact of exponential data growth, on privacy and on the environment.

For far more people now, the balance between benefits and risks in technology is far from clear. There are people who are very enthusiastic, as people were at the Summit, but others are anxious about long term existential risks, or the disruptive impacts that AI will have on societies, economies, and governments, in the short term. The underlying question here, I think, is one of concerns about how digitalization can be shaped to promote the common good. It's the same issue as at WSIS, but I think understanding of it is now different.

The third factor is that WSIS+20 will take place in the context of a much broader international discussion about the role of technology in society, and how it intersects with other global concerns and priorities.

At the summit, information technology was the new thing in international public policy, but its importance obviously lay in the future. Now, it's inextricable from every aspect of international public policy, though it has profound impacts on geopolitics, on conflict, on sustainability, and climate change, inequality and poverty. New technology is central to thinking about these, and about the risks we face, such as, say, the financial crisis of 2008, or the COVID pandemic, and so, they are important across the whole range of UN work, which is part of what drives the Global Digital Compact.

The year of the WSIS 10 year review, 2015, also saw agreement on the UN's overarching priorities to 2030, which are the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs. Many of those are running behind schedule, and the UN considers the impact of digital technologies on them to be crucial to achieving them in what is left of the remaining five years. I think the WSIS review is significant because it offers a framework for considering the trajectory of the digital society in relation to all of these wider goals.

So, to the SDGs, which are going to be reviewed in 2030, and then replaced by something else, we know not what, and also to the outcomes of this year's Summit of the Future, which includes the GDC. I think the GDC is important because it will renew or revitalize the WSIS framework for the future. Negotiations on both will be very political, they're likely to conclude with a good deal of creative ambiguity, so I'll say something about each in turn.

I want to talk about the WSIS review first, even though it will happen later, because I think it is looking back, and has to be broader in a sense, particularly because it's looking back. I'd say it's valuable because of what it can reveal about the direction of travel, how far have we come in the past 20 years? And how far does that resemble what we expected or desired? Where are we today? And, what's needed to build on the successes that have been achieved, the goals that haven't been reached? Address the problems we hadn't anticipated? Where do we want to go tomorrow to achieve new goals and address those future problems that we can anticipate?

So, there's an opportunity here in these two UN processes, at this inflection point if you like, to consider how to optimize the Information Society, which is very different from maximizing digitalization. It's really rooted in global objectives which are non-digital as well as digital. In the

UN context and elsewhere, I've described this as three broad objectives, preserving what we value, promoting what we want, and preventing what we fear.

Now, I thought it might be useful to say something about six themes of the changing digital environment, which both the WSIS review and the GDC needs to address:

The first, inclusion. The goal of universal participation in the digital society is still a long way off, for women in many countries, for rural dwellers, for minority kids for the elderly, for those with disabilities, those on lower incomes, often least connected, and that's not just a matter of quantity, but of quality. Meaningful connectivity is very much a vogue phrase at the moment. How far are people able to use services in a way that will add value for them, or can afford to do so?

I think there's much greater understanding now that digital inequality is inseparable from underlying social and economic inequalities. Digitalization can exacerbate those underlying inequalities as well as mitigating them, especially if services are only made available online.

International inequalities are also important here, for example, the way opportunities to develop digital businesses are spread unequally between developed and developing countries, and the ways in which data derived from developing countries are used much more by global businesses than by local enterprises or local governments. Those are priority themes for developing countries.

My second theme is environment, on which I've recently been working with UNCTAD. There are ways in which digital technologies can help to mitigate climate change, but the carbon emissions due to them are growing, and will grow faster as a result of AI, the Internet of Things, and the growth in data exploitation. Digital networks and equipment also require scarce resources, including water. There's a growing crisis of e-waste, with very limited recycling. I think there's increasing understanding that digital development will not be sustainable economically if it is not sustainable environmentally as well, and the review needs to reflect on that greater understanding and the trajectory of the environmental impact, the potential for a more circular digital economy.

The third area I've chosen is the integration of digital development with other world priorities. It's no longer possible to consider digital development in isolation from other international goals. Assessment of its impact, past, present, future, positive, negative, has to ask what is the relationship between digitalized nations and the environment, or health, or employment, not what can digitalization do for the environment or health or employment, which is really what WSIS was

thinking. Experts in those other traditional policy areas need to be much more involved in these discussions, alongside expertise from the digital world.

The fourth theme has to do with governance. Digital governance is much more complicated than it was at WSIS, when most governments were represented by telecoms ministries and regulators in those discussions at the time. The context now is much more about impact, than on the technology itself, and far more institutions and fora are involved. It's difficult for national governments and other stakeholders to participate effectively, which is a problem. One challenge for the review is going to be to think about how digital governance has changed, and where it hasn't. How have the international governance frameworks, that were established 20 years ago, evolved to meet very different circumstances now? How have our digital strategies at the national level integrated with strategies for the rest of society, and the economy.

Related to that, maybe, is international norms and standards. The WSIS outcome documents were clear that the information society should evolve in ways that are consistent with overarching global guidelines, such as the UN Charter and international rights agreements, but the digital world is much less contained by national borders, and so it's much less susceptible to traditional forms of governance, and that's posed important challenges in many areas, for example, data governance, data sovereignty, the role of regulation, and its relationship with innovation.

My last theme would be multistakeholder engagement, which was an innovation at the Summit, but is now mainstream, and international discussion of the future of the Information Society. I would say the nature of the multistakeholder community has changed enormously in the past 20 years. The whole power dynamics of digital governance has been transformed by the rise of immensely powerful data corporations, and the need to focus on the impact of technology has led to many more international organizations and, at a national level, government departments being involved. The UN Secretary General has called for a new dynamic here, one that includes multilateral, multistakeholder, and multisectoral engagement in developing the Digital Society. What we've learned over the past 20 years should be an important part of feeding that into the review, but also the Global Digital Compact.

So, let me turn to the Compact, which is going to address these issues, and it's going to be agreed before the WSIS review. It's the results of two more recent UN processes. About six years ago, the UN Secretary General set up a High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, to recommend, I quote, "how the international community can work together to optimize the use of digital technologies and mitigate the risks", and it released the report called 'The Age of Digital Interdependence', really important word, interdependence. After it reported in 2020, he published a 'Roadmap on

Digital Cooperation', which set out proposals for coordinated multistakeholder action on eight themes, which included connectivity and inclusion, capacity building, human rights, trust and security, and what he called "a more effective architecture for digital cooperation".

So, that's one route to the current proposal for Global Digital Compact, the other was a document the Secretary General produced in 2021, called 'Our Common Agenda'. This was much more wide ranging. It's concern was to strengthen multilateral cooperation, and essentially revitalize the United Nations for the modern age, including better management of critical global commons, and global public goods that deliver equitably and sustainably for all. The UN's now agreed to hold a Summit of the Future on that agenda in September, and so this is described as a "once in a generation opportunity" to enhance cooperation on critical challenges, and address gaps in global governance, reaffirm existing commitments, including to the Sustainable Development Goals on the UN Charter, and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to positively impact people's lives.

The concerns in this are very wide ranging. There's sustainable development, poverty reduction, inclusion and equality, conflict management, climate change, human rights, a better financial system, transforming education, and so on. One of those elements is, I quote, "an open free and secure digital future", and that's a cross-cutting one because of the importance digitalization has across all of the other areas. The aim of the Summit is to produce a new and comprehensive global agreement, which will be called 'Pact for the Future', in a way that will have a relationship to the SDGs, in the way that the Global Digital Compact does to the WSIS review, and to WSIS governance.

So, the Global Digital Compact's intended as a contribution to the Summit and the Pact from a digital perspective, and it's expected, the UN says, "to outline shared principles for an open, free and secure future for all". It has this focus on some critical themes, digital openness and digital security, data governance and the governance of new technologies such as AI, inclusion, connectivity, the relationship these have with sustainable development and human rights.

Now, in discussions I've been in the digital community, many people have tended to see this as a proposal that's concerned primarily with the digital world. But actually, for other stakeholders in the UN system, it's about the contribution of digitalization to broader global goals and to the Summit as a whole. In practice, it's both things. It's both directed at the digital world, and the rest of global public policy, and I think it's important to see it in both.

The current starting point for negotiations is the zero draft which was published yesterday, and, obviously, I'm going to have to take time to look at that. I obviously can't go into detail here, but it's much more substantive and substantial than many people had expected, including myself. In some ways, I think it looks like something that maybe looks something like what the WSIS documents might say if they were written today. It addresses today's digital priorities in much the way that the Summit tried to address those 20 years ago. It perhaps looks more coherent than the WSIS outcome documents because it's the product of a small team working together as a zero draft, it hasn't yet gone through that negotiating process where people change the text.

It starts with a set of principles for digital cooperation, which are quite similar to those in WSIS, inclusive, development focused, based on human rights, innovation friendly, multistakeholder, but it puts more emphasis on gender equality, on environmental sustainability, and on business responsibility, and accountability to stakeholders. It focuses on a number of broad areas, closing digital divides, and accelerating progress towards the SDGs, which include digital skills and literacy, inclusion in the digital economy, and inclusive, open, safe and secure, digital space, equitable data governance, and the governance of emerging technologies including AI. In each of these, it identifies opportunities and risks. It proposes a number of commitments, and it suggests actions which should be taken now.

Many of the proposed commitments are linked to specific Sustainable Development Goals, and many of them include specifics that can be measured, something that was weak in WSIS, the WSIS targets ended anyway 10 years ago. The draft endorses the IGF and multistakeholder processes, and it proposes some new institutional bodies, a UN digital human rights service, and three concerned with artificial intelligence, an international scientific panel, a global fund on AI for sustainable development, and an annual global dialogue on AI governance.

Where the WSIS review is concerned, it asks it to identify how WSIS processes can support practical implementation of the Compact, for example, by adapting the action lines, which look very, very out of date now, to reflect what's in the Compact rather than what was appropriate 20 years ago, and it proposes that there should be a high level review of the Compact every two years, rather than the WSIS reviews which have been every 10.

So, this zero draft will be the starting point for intergovernmental negotiations that are due to take place in April and May, and will then feed into the Summit of the Future in September. I expect those negotiations will be quite difficult and contentious, because UN negotiation sessions always are, especially in today's world where geopolitics is much more difficult than it was 20 years ago,

but it is a substantial starting point, and, I think, as I said a minute ago, I think it looks quite like the sort of thing that might have emerged from WSIS if the summit took place now.

Curious fact, at the time of WSIS I wrote the introduction to a book which was discussing what the outcome of the Maitland Commission would have been at the time of WSIS, that was the commission the ITU held in the mid-1980s that basically first identified the problems associated with the digital divide.

I think it's looking at the issues as they are now with similar perspectives to those that came from WSIS. It maintains the principles established in the summit, but it addresses the opportunities and the risks that have emerged more recently, particularly those concerned with AI, and it recognizes that digital governance is more complicated and critical, now that digital technology is central to everything in economy, society, and culture.

So, once it is agreed, I think the Compact is likely to shift the overall agenda for a wide range of international discussions in the digital field, when its final text achieves that kind of the legitimacy and resonance which the WSIS documents had overnight when they were agreed in 2003 and 2005. That will shift the agenda also for the WSIS review, so for the work that I will be doing over the next year with the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and other agencies. That review is going to need to reflect the priorities in the Compact.

What's its most useful contribution? I think it is to provide reflection on the trajectory, on the three time phases of past, present, and future, and to consider what those suggest about the future development of a digital society that preserves what we value, promotes what we want, and prevents what we fear.

My last point, I think, would be about how to play a constructive role in those two processes. I think it's really important for all stakeholders to reflect, not just on what's important to them, their own priorities, but on what is important to the other stakeholders who are taking part in those negotiations, particularly those on the demand side of the digital economy, the people who are responsible for education, health, social wealth, conflict management, environmental impact, and so forth, and also on the priorities of developing countries, which are the majority in the UN fora that will be negotiating these documents, and for whom the critical issues, in both WSIS outcomes and the Digital Compact, are often different to those that are critical to those of us in Europe.

I hope that's been useful and feeds into the comments, questions, and discussion that you're going to have. Thank you very much for listening to me.

Janne Hirvonen

Excellent, David, many thanks for these insights. Aki, would you maybe like to take the floor. I hope, David that you have time to follow the discussion and participate? I suppose there will be questions and then discussion on this topic afterwards. At least, I've marked a couple of points that I would like to discuss further. But, please, Aki. Go ahead.

Aki Enkenberg

Okay. My name is Aki Ankerberg. I work for the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Department for Development Policy, where I lead the team on digital and innovation, and I was asked to talk a bit about the Finnish perspective to WSIS, and the ongoing processes regarding the negotiation of the GDC and other issues.

First, I just wanted to really thank David for the insightful and very well informed talk about the history, the past, present, and the future of the WSIS process, or the UN digital agenda. I guess one of the questions in many of our minds is how can something that was initiated 20 years ago be still relevant today, because, in the digital space, things move very fast, and we all know that something that the governments agreed on, or stakeholders agreed on, 20 years ago might be badly out of date in 2024. But, it's all about the process, I think, and it's all about, if we look at what's happening this year and next year, it's all about, also, how do we make this present process relevant for today and for the future?

In the UN system, nothing ever dies. Everything that's been initiated always stays alive in one way or another. Last year, the UN held a Global Water Conference, in 2023. The previous time this was held was more than 30 years ago, but the process is still alive, and it was able to kind of revitalize that discussion as well. So, we, of course, hope that the same thing can be done for for WSIS.

From the Finnish government's perspective, I very much agree with David on this observation that this year, and next year, is kind of a touchpoint or a milestone in the process. There's an opportunity to really look at how do we refresh these agreements or commitments through the Global Digital Compact? What can it be good for? How can it support the WSIS process, and go towards the 20 year review in 2025 with this mindset.

20 years ago, Finland was a very active participant in the very early days of the WSIS process. We were there in both of the summits, participated very actively. It was an important milestone for us as well, because, in those days 20 years ago, we were regarded as a world leading information

society, so, of course, we were eager to also share our experiences and thinking in terms of what this societal transformation is about, and how do we use technology for better social outcomes.

This was one angle to that. We participated in it because we thought that the topic of the Summit, the substance of the discussions, was important for Finland in itself. Secondly, we also realized that there's a real opportunity here to start doing much, much more in the space of global development. So, this whole WSIS process and WSIS thinking really influenced us in terms of mainstreaming these issues in our development policy and development cooperation.

As David rightly emphasized, for many of the of the world's countries that participated in these discussions and in this process, this really was about development fundamentally, better social development, better economic development, leveraging technology for that, leveraging knowledge for that, in improved ways, so also in the Finnish case.

Right after the WSIS Summit were over, 2005, 2006, we started to engage with other countries, we started to develop projects and programs and partnerships in this field, and started to work with other countries in terms of sharing our knowledge, sharing our capabilities, providing funding and resourcing for developing countries to develop their own information societies or innovation systems. Later on, maybe 10 years down the line, this started to become more about digital development, since 2015, 2016. But, in the early days, for the first 5 to 10 years, I would say Finland was really one of the forerunners in this field. There were not so many other countries in the Global North that were seriously interested in doing development in this space.

Since 2015, 2016, there's been an explosion of all sorts of digital development initiatives. Many other countries have entered the fora, the European Union is extremely active these days as well, the development banks are providing massive amounts of financing for digital projects, many other UN agencies are also active. So, in addition to those traditionally the custodian agencies of this agenda in Geneva, like the ITU, WIPO, UNCTAD, and others, there's been an emergence of other types of UN agencies, like UNDP, or UNICEF, or the World Food Program, that have started to really incorporate technology and innovation in their operations, and started to also play a part in this field of digital development.

I agree with David that the world does look different now. It's not the same environment anymore, not the same landscape. There's been a lot of progress on connectivity, yes. The technological landscape looks different, our understanding of the risks that technology also creates, and the emergence of technology as a geopolitical issue, makes this a much more contested space. It's not necessarily so easy to agree on these issues anymore, as it was 20 years ago.

Also, and I'm happy that David mentioned this, since 2018, 2019, there's been a shift in terms of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres starting to provide stronger leadership on the digital agenda, and initiating these New York-based processes, the High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, the Roadmap on Digital Cooperation, and now the GDC. So, it's not anymore only about the WSIS process in the UN system. It used to be so, many, many years ago, but now you have new types of processes, new ideas coming to the fore, new issues emerging such as artificial intelligence, or data governance, or others, that need to be somehow tackled, and this has really been a priority for the Secretary General, especially in his second term now, as David mentioned.

The consultation process for the Global Digital Compact has lasted already for more than a year and a half. Finland has taken quite an active part in this. We've spoken a lot in New York, we've provided inputs to written contributions, we've been part of different kinds of events, talking about our priorities. We've seen this not only as a kind of an abstract opportunity to update the UN's general digital agenda, but also a way to maybe advance some of our own priorities.

We really think that there needs to be more action on closing the digital divide, especially in terms of connectivity and expansion of digital infrastructure. There needs to be stronger involvement of the private sector in this process, more financing towards this objective.

We do agree that there's a need also to investigate more thoroughly what is the UN's role in governing artificial intelligence, or steering developments around data governance globally. We don't know exactly yet what the solution or the institutional arrangement should look like, or what's the best possible scenario, but something possibly needs to be done.

We think that there needs to be a stronger commitment, maybe the time is right for the stronger commitment to human rights in the in the online space.

Gender equality, or tackling the gender digital divide, has been a long term priority for Finland, which we've also flagged in the context of the GDC.

We definitely think there's a need to take building of digital skills, mainstreaming digital learning, developing digital competencies more seriously, prioritizing active digital citizenship, also through learning, needs to be part of the agenda.

And then, the link to climate action. Digital cannot be regarded as a field anymore where climate doesn't matter, so the environmental footprint of digital infrastructure services needs to be addressed.

Then, finally, maybe the GDC can also provide further direction in terms of the UN's own role. What is it that the UN is specifically well designed to do? And also, what it should not necessarily prioritize? So, to have more arguments around what is the value in the United Nations system, specifically, to advance some of the digital priorities.

So, the zero draft is out, it's about two days old, difficult to provide a comprehensive reaction to that yet, I think we're kind of studying it at the moment and trying to develop, or refine, our positions. Finland doesn't act here alone, we act as part of the European Union, so, in the negotiation process that will unfold in the next couple of months, Finland will be participating in the process as part of the EU. We don't negotiate as Finland, but, of course, we provide inputs to the process, and take part in formulating the EU's position, quite actively.

Overall, just a couple of comments regarding the substance here. Definitely a lot of the areas in the zero draft look quite good, and also quite carefully crafted. The emphasis on the digital divide, on human rights, gender, digital economy, are good.

Possibly, I'm thinking, and I think many others agree, that it's the recommendations really around data governance and artificial intelligence, as well as the implementation mechanisms, where most of the discussions will focus on, because there are lots of new proposals, new ideas, in terms of what the UN can do, or should do, going forward, new kinds of institutional mandates being established, new kinds of mechanisms being established, and these often come with more complexity.

Always, when we establish something new, the complexity increases in the system, and also they come with cost implications. Every time the UN organizes a new process, organizes new events, summits, they cost money, and member states are also reluctant to actually sometimes pay for these costs, and, of course, there's this danger of overreaching, going too far, in terms of what the UN should be doing. I think, in many cases, we'd rather see -- for example, in the field of AI governance -- that the AI regulation is something that needs to be dealt with at the regional level, in Europe in the context of the European Union's legislation, not necessarily at this point in time at the global level.

So, the role for the UN needs to be quite well thought out, maybe it's more around facilitation of cooperation, maybe it's more about bringing existing stakeholders together, investing in evidence building, assessment of risks, scientific cooperation, etc., instead of hard regulatory action, and and so on.

This is my kind of current take on it today, and tomorrow I might be wiser. Thank you

Janne Hirvonen

Many thanks, Aki, for these remarks.

I would maybe like to add to what Aki mentioned, a concrete example of of Finnish proficiency with regard to WSIS. We have been a strong supporter of the multistakeholder model on Internet governance. It's a longstanding priority for us. Most recently, we have extended additional financing for the Internet Governance Forum, for instance, until the end of 2025, so that's the end of the third project phase.

But maybe, David, if you could elaborate a bit more? You touched upon the issue of, let's say, the negotiation positions approaching the WSIS+20 revue, how do you see, for instance, the positions of the Global South countries, or as they say these days, it's the Global Majority, how would you describe the situation in this regard? We are in totally different setup than 10 years ago, not to even mention 20 years ago.

David Souter

I am working for a UN agency, so I'm obviously not going to be able to comment on individual countries or positions, but I think the issue I would emphasize is that it's really important for all stakeholders to think beyond their own particular perspectives and interests and priorities here, and seek to understand the different priorities of other actors, other stakeholders, within this context. To some degree that's been easier to do across stakeholder boundaries, within some international discussions, than it has been to sweep across the different types of experience that different types of economies have had.

Within the UN context, much of the developing country participation is as the G77, so that is as a collective view, rather in the way that Finland participates as part of the European Union, and, sadly, my own country does not any longer. One of the difficulties, that I've sometimes seen in United Nations meetings here, is a lack of dialogue outside the meeting room itself between developed and developing countries. I think that that much more dialogue outside the negotiating room itself would be helpful in building those more complex perspectives.

I think the other thing is that, within these negotiations, obviously you can't simply expect to get everything you want. These are negotiations that involve compromises, and they involve compromises between countries with very, very different perspectives, and so you get creative ambiguity. Sometimes that can be really constructive, and sometimes not.

As an interesting aside, maybe this is interesting, when you go back to the WSIS process itself, I remember, in my country, there were no government departments that were keen on WSIS being held, the three government departments that were involved kept trying to pass the portfolio on to each other. Similarly, when the Internet Governance Forum was proposed, that was highly controversial, and it was not supported by a lot of those governments who now see it as really important, and valuable, and so forth. It was a compromise, which emerged out of the negotiating process, that people didn't necessarily expect to succeed.

So, experimentation is going to have to be part of this, and finding ways forward that aren't necessarily what you initially want, from your own national or sectoral perspective. I'm trying to be a bit careful of what I'm saying. I hope that's useful.

Janne Hirvonen

Excellent, many thanks. If no further remarks or comments, then we will thank you, David. Many thanks again for this presentation and insights. We'll be in touch. Let's put it that way.

David Souter

Okay

Janne Hirvonen

Many thanks.

David Souter

Okay. Thank you. Bye bye.